

First Day of Rosh Hashanah – September 25th, 2014

A Rabbi once asked his students, “how do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?” Immediately the students thought that they grasped the importance of the question. There are, after all, prayers that can be recited and rituals that can be performed only at night. And there are prayers and rituals that belong only to the day. It is therefore important to know when the night has ended and day has begun.

So the brightest of the students offered an answer: “When I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor’s, that’s when the night has ended and day has begun.” A second student offered her answer: “When I look from the fields and I see a house and I can tell that it’s my house and not the house of my neighbor, that’s when the night has ended and the day has begun.” A third student offered an answer: “When I can distinguish the animals in the yard – and I can tell a cow from a horse – that’s when the night has ended.”

Each of these answers brought a sadder, more severe frown to the Rabbi’s face – until finally he shouted: “No! You don’t understand! You only know how to divide! You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor’s, one animal from another, one color from all the others. Is that all that we can do – divide, separate, split the world into pieces? Isn’t the world broken enough - split into enough fragments? No, my dear students, it’s not that way at all! Our Torah and Jewish values want more from us.

The shocked students looked into the sad face of their Rabbi. One of them ventured, “Then Rabbi, tell us: How do we know that night has ended and day has begun?” The Rabbi stared back into the faces of his students and with a gentle voice responded: “When you look into the face of the person who is beside you and you can see that that person is your brother or your sister, when you can recognize that person as a friend, then, finally, the night has ended and the day has begun.”

We live in a very broken world: we are surrounded by so much division, hatred and pain: so much suffering and indifference. Like the students in the story it seems that what we know best is how to divide, how to separate and further split our world into pieces.

As I look back on the year that just concluded, I recall many examples of times we were divided – serious events that pushed people apart – protests and disagreements, some which took place very close to home, where people with opposing views were seen as enemies. Our world is turning into us against them – right and left: black and white. What concerns me most is that there seems to be very little gray left in America, very little middle ground for compromise left in society and for those of us who often maintain the middle ground it is getting more and more difficult to remain strong and secure.

As we gather here in this beautiful sanctuary on this most sacred of days – we sit close to one another, but as your Rabbi – I worry not about the things that unite us – I worry about the things that divide us. I worry about the things that separate husbands from wives, parents from children – I worry about the divisions between Republicans and Democrats; Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform; Christians, Muslims and Jews – everywhere we look we see – families are divided, nations are divided, religions are divided, synagogues are divided - our world is divided.

And like the rabbi in that story, I too do not believe that is what our Torah wants from us -- we are put on this earth not to divide but to gather the fragments of a broken world and reunite them, heal them, elevate them and make them sacred and whole once again – until we can look into the face of the person beside us and see that person as a friend and that every one of us is created in God’s Image.

We live in a world where the lines are drawn, the divisions are in place – choose our side; enlist in our cause. And the beauty of this arrangement is that once we have joined a cause – there is no longer any need to think for ourselves – our script is written, our lines are ready to be recited. And this arrangement is so convenient for whenever something happens in the world – we know exactly what everyone is going to say. We have become so predictable in our opinions. This is true for us as Americans and it is true for us as Jews when we think about our relationship with Israel and what is best for Israel. Israelis face this same dilemma in their relationship with Palestinians. It seems that Israelis are supposed to be insensitive to the needs of Palestinians and Palestinians must deny Israel’s right to exist. We rarely hear about the people on either side who want peace. We know there are people on both sides of the conflict who want peace if somehow these people could work together without the political pressures placed on them.

In more recent times, the challenges of the Jewish State of Israel, the debates about what Israel should do to achieve peace have moved beyond the Jewish community. It has now become an important debate for our Christian friends as various Christian groups continue to debate and discuss how they should be involved and what public statements they should make to support peace. As I listen to these debates and discuss them with our local Christian leaders, I often ask, how do these statements help. How do they bring people to the table? It is no surprise that boycott is trending again because our society has moved away from each other – we seem to be no longer willing to sit together to debate with respect.

Once upon a time politics was defined as the art of the possible – now it could better be defined as the art of the impossible. The floor of Congress used to be one of our great American achievements – a rare place where heated and honest debate produced hard won compromise and flawed but real progress. No longer – today our representatives too often can be found talking past each other as they play to their respective parties – and compromise by some – is considered an act of betrayal.

So here is the Rosh Hashanah resolution I am hoping we can all make today. Let us make this the year that we begin to break out of the divisiveness that is destroying our world. Like the Rabbi in our opening story – who was trying to teach that we need to stop dividing the world and find new ways to unite it, I want us to do our part to honestly listen and consider the positions of others – especially those with whom we disagree. We have a right to insist that others consider our views as well – but we should be willing in the spirit of the true vision of Abraham – the founder of the Jewish people and the one whose stories we read every year on this sacred holiday – to state our passion and then really truly, listen with an open heart.

I want to share a story with you that I hope will inspire you. It is an example of one small step towards understanding and trust that years ago would have been only in our imagination – especially in this community.

We Rabbis like to study and this past year I joined a study group unlike any other. We study sacred texts from our religious tradition and we study in *hevruta* – a small group where the discussion and debate is out loud – the way we Jews have studied for centuries. But this study group is unique because I participate with leaders of a local Church and local Mosque. I want to acknowledge both our member Adam Pechter who brought this idea to Princeton and Prof. Peter Ochs, the Professor at the University of Virginia and the father and grandfather of members of this synagogue, who helped develop the idea called Scriptural Reasoning. The idea is we take a theme, a concept and see what role it plays in the Torah, the Christian Bible and the Koran. It is fascinating to see the similarities and differences in our traditions.

We began with the theme of fire and I presented the story of the Burning Bush, the great scene of when God first appears to Moses in the form of fire. We talked about how fire can burn and fire can inspire. In the Christian Bible, Rev. Dave Davis of Nassau Church taught us a story about John the Baptist and how fire was understood in the days of Jesus and the early Christians. And then we spent time studying a text from the Koran how Mohamed provides fire to those who believe, as a symbol for acceptance and faith and how the prophet takes away that fire from those who do not believe.

In so many ways, this study group has changed my perspective on inter-religious traditions. It has allowed me to see my Christian and Muslim friends through their sacred texts and to see how our values are so similar. It helps us put aside the things that divide us and instead focus on what unites us – respect for humanity, understanding the role God wants us to play in this world and a constant reminder of doing our own part to make this world a better place for future generations.

Could such a simple change of perspective really transform our world? The people in my study group are beginning to think so and many other religious leaders of the past have thought so as well. Will it be difficult? Absolutely! But it is possible and it is so sorely needed. Not only can this transform our world – it can transform each and every one of us – and make our lives and the lives of our loved ones – so much more fulfilling.

Now I admit, for Jews, getting beyond this “us versus them” thing is a real challenge. For thousands of years it has been us versus them – and it usually ended with us getting *schmised*. Anti-Semitism is not some ancient relic of a distant past – it murdered our ancestors in Auschwitz. It threatens the very existence of Israel. Yes “us versus them” – is a very comfortable category for Jews to operate in historically -- but “us versus them” only perpetuates a divided world – it extends the hurt and does little to facilitate the healing.

Let us begin to challenge how we approach the world. In a world that is divided between us and them,

when is it right to make it about us and when is it necessary to make it about them? I hope we can all use the time we have on these sacred days to take stock of our own lives. If we think of the issues of this past year that occupied our life and took our attention – and we find that all the problems of our life is because of *them* – our spouse or partner who does not understand us, our parents who do not accept us, our friends who are jealous of us, our co-workers who are trying to get ahead of us – if it is all their fault – we may want to reconsider. And similarly, if we spend all of our time blaming ourselves for everything that does not go our way – if it is always our fault, our weakness, our failures that cause the downfalls in our life – maybe, just maybe we are mistaken.

I know that the vision I have presented makes our life challenging. I know that the world of us versus them – was so much easier. We knew what side we were on, what positions to hold, what opinions to embrace and what lines to recite. In that old world – there were Republicans and Democrats, gay and straight, feminists and shovanists, enemies and friends – everyone had their place and everyone knew their part. You could go to your Rabbi and he would *paskan a shayla* – he would answer all your questions – he would tell you what was forbidden and what was permitted – what was *kosher* and what was *treif* – but that is not our world any more.

So my message on this most sacred of days is that we need to think for ourselves. Our rabbis, teachers, and politicians can help – but bottom line – everyone must decide for his or herself – and I know that is not easy.

A colleague recently shared with me a beautiful lesson that helps illustrate this point from the Babylonian Talmud (Hagigah 3b). It tells the story of a student who was overwhelmed by the contradictory opinions he met at every turn in his study of Judaism. He sought clarity from his teachers and all he found was confusion. He wanted answers and they gave him more questions. Finally he cries out in exasperation – “this one says it is permitted and this one says it is forbidden; this one says it is pure and this one impure – how am I supposed to learn what God wants me to do in such an environment?”

And then the *Talmud* responds with profound advice:

“All these contradictions and differing opinions were all given by one Creator, one God presented them. Our challenge is to make our ear like a funnel and develop a *levv mayvin*, a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who declare things clean and those who declare them to be unclean, those who declare them to be *kosher* and those who declare them to be *treif*.”

What a remarkable text. Written so long ago – it teaches that what we need most to make it in this world – is not the right answer, but the right heart – a *levv mayvin* – a *levv shalem* – a discerning heart, a full heart – open to new ideas that help us all complete one another.

It is no coincidence my friends – that the new *Machzor* you hold in your hands today – the new *Machzor* that I believe will transform our prayer experience on these most sacred days of the year – is one that marries traditional prayers and modern sensitivities – it combines the texts of our liturgy that we have been chanting for years with modern, thoughtful insights to add so much meaning to the prayer experience – and it is no coincidence that it is called *Lev Shalem* – a complete heart. For that is what we seek today: a *levv mayvin* – a *levv shalem* – a discerning heart, a complete heart. We need to ask ourselves, what does it mean to pray with a full heart. What does it mean to live with a full heart? What does it mean to open our hearts so that they can be filled with the emotions and experiences of others that will enhance our personal lives and ultimately unite us? And what can we do in our own lives to help others develop a full heart? What can we do to help others join us in the debate and discussion without allowing it to reach the level of anger and exclusion and divisiveness?

A Rabbi once asked his students, “how do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?” As each student answered, the Rabbi became more frustrated and more sad – until finally he shouted: “No! “You only know how to divide! Isn’t our world broken enough? Isn’t our world split into enough fragments? The Torah wants so much more from us.

So this then is my prayer today – for a *levv shalem* -- a full heart that will enable us to look into the face of the person who is beside us and see that that person is our brother or sister or friend – a heart that will allow us to respect other views and the people who hold these views even when disagree, a heart that will bring us together to pray and sing, to celebrate and to mourn, to be one strengthened community, then and only then will the darkness end and the new light will have begun.